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AUTHOR Gallant, Steve; Housden, Theresa
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ABSTRACT

The large number of dropouts estimated by the California State Department of Education has caused concern for educators, lawmakers, and the general public. A 1985 investigation of the graduation rate of the 1979 freshman class of San Juan High School was conducted which also sought to identify logistical problems with the collection of data needed for determining the graduation rate. Dropout research has been complicated by lack of a uniform definition of dropouts and a uniform method of estimating the dropout rate. Attrition rates overlook details about where, when, and why students dropout. San Juan High School was chosen because its student body composition resembled state averages in background and achievement and the school had a stable population and educational programs. Records were checked to determine which students who had entered as freshman did not graduate with their class. Efforts were made to locate these students and to determine their status. Logistical problems in tracking the students included the variability of record keeping and transferring, student name changes, undocumented address changes, and legal constraints on the release of student information. The overall graduation rate was found to be 76.9 percent although only 59.1 percent graduated from San Juan High in January or June of 1983. Sixty-nine students who had dropped out earned their diplomas or passed a proficiency test at a later time. The actual dropout rate was 22.6 percent. The freshman grade point averages of those who later dropped out were lower than those who subsequently graduated. (ABL)

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HOW MANY GRADUATE?

A Study of the Freshman Class of 1979 at San Juan High School

November 1985

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A post hoc study of the freshman class of 1979 at San Juan High School was conducted in the spring of 1985 by the Research and Evaluation Department of the San Juan Unified School District. The purposes of the study were:

(1) to determine how many of the freshmen who were enrolled at San Juan on the opening day of school in September, 1979, actually went on to graduate or pass a proficiency test;

(2) to investigate methodological problems in tracing students and their graduation status as they transfer from school to school.

In addition to graduation status, other student information was collected and analyzed from transcripts and achievement test score files, such as, date of birth, 8th grade achievement test scores, and first semester, freshman year grades.

It was discovered that over 77% of the students in the study eventually satisfied the requirements established for graduating from high school or passed a high school proficiency test. Almost three-fifths of the group graduated from San Juan High School, the school at which they originally enrolled as freshmen. Overall, it was found that those who graduated from high school were achieving academically at a higher level during 8th and 9th grade than those who eventually dropped out of school.

The graduation rate of this study of students at San Juan High is similar to the rates found by studies done in two other large school districts in the U.S. It is somewhat higher than the rate reported for the same period of time by the State of California Department of Education and the rate listed in the national High School and Beyond study.

During the course of the study, several problems were encountered with the collection of data. Most notable among these was the highly variable manner with which districts maintain student records. This variability was compounded by student name changes and privacy of information laws, both of which served to make data tracking more difficult.

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Study conducted by:	Research and Evaluation Department San Juan Unified School District November, 1985
Study Design:	Phillip Oakes Theresa (Terry) Housden, Ed.D.
Data Collection:	Steve Gallant Georgiann Ireland
Report Prepared by:	Steve Gallant Theresa (Terry) Housden, Ed.D.

Revised January, 1986

HOW MANY GRADUATE?

A STUDY OF
THE FRESHMAN CLASS OF 1979 AT SAN JUAN HIGH SCHOOL

Recently, reports issued by the California State Department of Education have estimated the numbers of students leaving high school before graduation to be anywhere from 29 to 33.6 percent of the student population. This large number of dropouts has become the focus of concern for educators, lawmakers and the general public.

The San Juan Unified School District is actively concerned about those students who do not complete their high school education. Programs exist throughout the district to attract and keep students who have chosen to leave the regular high schools before graduation. Limiting the efforts of these programs has been the lack of information documenting how many students have completed high school. The lack of this information has meant, for example, that it has not been known how many students who entered the district's high schools as freshmen eventually satisfied the requirements for graduation.

Rather than accept for district students the statewide estimate of approximately a 70% graduation rate, the Research and Evaluation Department of the San Juan Unified School District initiated a retrospective, follow-up study of students who entered San Juan High School as freshmen on the opening day of school in September, 1979. The purpose of the study was twofold: (1) to estimate the graduation rate for one high school in the district, and (2) to identify the logistical problems involved with the collection of the data necessary for determining the graduation rate.

The study was originally conducted in response to a request from the district's Superintendent for information regarding the numbers and percentages of students within the district who actually complete their education. San Juan High was chosen as the site for the study because, during the period of the study, it was either at or near the state average in a number of factors typically used when comparing schools.

RECENT RESEARCH ON DROPOUT RATES

The consistency of the results in much of the recent research on dropouts has been hampered by the lack of a uniform definition of a dropout. Further complicating this problem have been the different methods of estimating the proportion of students who do not complete high school. Additionally, many states provide the option of a proficiency type examination as an alternative for students who want to legally stop attending high school before satisfying the requirements for graduation. Frequently, the results of these examinations are not consistently reported back to the schools by the testing institutions.

Many national and statewide studies of the dropout problem make use of attrition data to estimate the number of students who do not complete their high school education. Simply stated, attrition rate is the difference, expressed as a percentage, between the number of 9th grade enrollees and the number of 12th grade enrollees four years later. This method is typically used by the State of California's Department of Education when reporting dropout information.

Despite several limitations inherent in the use of attrition data as a determinant of how many students complete high school, it does have some validity in macro-settings such as on the state or national level. Using the attrition method to determine the rate of completion, the California State Department of Education estimated the class of 1983 to have graduated 70.7% of all the students who enrolled as freshmen in the fall of 1979.

However, on a school or district level, attrition rates overlook too many significant details about where, when and why students choose to stop attending school. Several studies conducted within the 1979 to 1983 time period found rates somewhat different from the attrition-derived rate reported by the State of California. (Information on other dropout studies is summarized in the Appendix.)

Data from the nationally conducted High School and Beyond study provided an estimation that 72.6% completed high school (the data from the California component of the study suggested that only 66.4% were able to complete). Two large school district, Los Angeles Unified and the Austin (Texas) Independent School District, closely examined their districtwide rates of completion during the 1979 to 1983 period and reported rates calculated for four years of 74.5% and 76%, respectively. (See the Appendix for a computational explanation of these rates.)

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

The population for the San Juan High School study was established using the 386 students who enrolled as freshmen on the first day of classes in September, 1979. San Juan High itself was chosen because the student body composition closely approximated the state averages in most student background and achievement variables. Also, the school had not experienced any major changes in either student population composition, educational programs or instructional/administrative personnel immediately before or during the time of the study.

The San Juan Unified School District's Data Processing Department provided computer lists of all 12th graders enrolled at San Juan High in June, 1983, and all 9th graders enrolled in June, 1980. After cross-checking the computer lists with a list of June, 1983 San Juan High graduates and a list of the adds and drops for the 1979-80 school year, it was determined that approximately 180 of the original 386 freshmen did <u>not</u> graduate from San Juan High in June, 1983. The emphasis of the study focused upon locating these "possible" dropouts either by personal contact or by contacting the schools which had requested their records.

The information used in the study was assembled into a research data bank which consisted of the following for each student:

* 8th grade achievement test scores;
* first semester, freshman year grades in English, social studies, and mathematics;
* date leaving San Juan High School;
* each student's date of birth;
* each student's sex.

The analysis of the data derived from the study had two major purposes:

(1) to calculate an accurate completion rate from the number of verifiable completers and dropouts compared to the original 386 students in the study group;

(2) to investigate the possibility of differences between completers and dropouts in the areas of school achievement, sex and age.

TABLE I

COMPLETION/DROPOUT STATUS

SAN JUAN HIGH SCHOOL FRESHMAN CLASS SEPTEMBER 4, 1979

High School Graduates	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
San Juan High School	228 (59.1)	114 (61.3)	114 (57.0)
June	206 (53.4)	109 (58.6)	97 (48.5)
Mid-year	22 (5.6)	5 (2.7)	17 (8.5)
Other High Schools in District	15 (3.9)	7 (3.8)	8 (4.0)
Continued in Other District Programs	10 (2.6)	5 (2.7)	5 (2.5)
High Schools Out of District	31 (8.0)	10 (5.4)	21 (10.5)
Passed Proficiency	13 (3.4)	5 (2.7)	8 (4.0)
Total Completers	297 (76.9)	141 (75.8)	156 (78.0)

Other	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Total Died	2 (0.5)	2 (1.1)	0 (0.0)
Total Drops	87 (22.6)	43 (23.1)	44 (22.0)
Total Freshmen, 9/4/79	386 (100.0)	186 (48.2)	200 (51.8)

RESULTS

Major Findings

A summary of the completion and dropout statistics is presented in Table 1. The graduation rate for the San Juan High School freshman class of 1979 was 76.9%, somewhat higher than the rate reported for the same period by the State of California Department of Education.

Almost sixty percent (59.1%) of the students in the study went on to graduate from San Juan High in either January or June, 1983. Among those 154 students who left San Juan, 69 went on to complete their education or pass a proficiency test, and 83 did not complete. Including the four who remained at San Juan High but did not graduate, there were 87 (22.6%) members of the study population who dropped out of school before graduation.

During the collection of data, it was found that a large number of the study group had left San Juan High before graduation. By using essentially the same method as the State of California to estimate the number of students who left before June, 1983, it was determined that the school lost 39.8% of the students in the study group. (This figure represents the change in population between September, 1979 and June, 1983.) This attrition rate does not include the four students who stayed at San Juan until June, 1983, but did not graduate, nor does it account for students who entered San Juan after the first day of school in September, 1979. It is substantially higher than the confirmed dropout rate resulting from an analysis of the data collected during the course of this study.

Presented in Table 2 is a comparison of the 8th grade Iowa Tests of Basic Skills achievement scores for students in the study who completed high school, passed a proficiency test or did not complete high school. The scores for those who did not complete high school are generally lower than the scores for the other two groups.

Table 2

8th Grade Achievement Scores on the ITBS for San Juan High School

Category	Reading Comprehension	Total Language	Total Mathematics
High School Graduates (n = 284)	8.20	8.50	8.70
Passed Proficiency Test (n = 13)	8.60	8.60	8.10
Dropouts (n = 87)	7.77	7.52	7.68

As can be seen, students who eventually graduated from high school or passed a proficiency test had average scores very close to the national averages for students of that age. (National averages would be 8.5 in all areas tested.) The averages for students who did not graduate were approximately one grade level below the national average.

A comparison of the grade point averages (GPA's) for the various groups derived from their first semester, freshman year grades in English and social studies is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of First Semester, Freshman Year GPA's in English and Social Studies

Category	English GPA	Social Studies GPA
High School Freshmen (n = 386)	2.46	1.97
Passed Proficiency Exam (n = 13)	1.75	1.50
Dropouts (n = 87)	1.90	1.64

A comparison of the computed grade point averages for the groups shows that the dropouts were not as academically adept as the group that went on to graduate. For example, the average GPA for all San Juan High School freshmen was 2.46 in English and 1.97 in social studies. The dropouts, as a group, had an average GPA of 1.90 in English and 1.64 in social studies. However, judgements between academic prowess and staying in school should be made very carefully. Note the GPA's in English and social studies for students passing a high school proficiency test. The average GPA for this group was actually lower than the average GPA for those who did not complete their high school education.

Other Findings

There was no observed tendency for dropouts to be predominantly either male or female students. There was a slight tendency for dropouts to be slightly older on the average than the group of students who completed their high school education or its equivalent.

Additionally, there were several factors which inhibited the collection of data about the dropouts. Student records had been purged from systems or had been lost with amazing frequency. Some of these losses could be attributed to students enrolling using step-parent or married names. Privacy of information laws also limited access to the records of certain agencies.

CONCLUSIONS

Almost one in every four students (22.6%) in the San Juan High School study dropped out of school before graduation in 1983. This figure is comparable to the rates reported by other large districts for the same period of time. The documented dropout rate for San Juan High School is approximately six percent less than the estimated average dropout rate for all high schools in California (29.3%).

There were a host of logistical problems associated with the tracking of students from their entrance as freshmen to graduation or completion through the testing process. Helping to obscure the data trail were: the variability of record keeping and transferring; student name changes; undocumented address changes; and legal constraints regarding the release of student information. All served to make what was anticipated to be a relatively straightforward search considerably more difficult.

SUMMARY OF DROPOUT STUDIES

APPENDIX

Study Title	Prepared By	Year Published	Site	Population	Dropout Rate Reported	One Year Rate*	Four Year Rate*	Notes
High School and Beyond	National Center for Education Statistics	1982	National	(1980) 30,000 Sophomores 28,000 Seniors	13.7% (2 years)	6.85%	27.4%	HSB covers only 2 years (spring, 10th grade to spring, 12th grade). Longitudinal study of high school students in America in the 80's.
Analyses of HSB California Data	David Stern	1984	Calif.	2,863	15.8% (2 years)	8.40%	33.6%	Examines dropout information from California sample of HSB data.
What Ever Happened to the Class of '83	Calif. State Department of Education	1983	Calif.	335,209	29.3% (4 years)	7.33%	29.3%	Uses attrition to determine statewide rate of early leaving.
Study of Dropouts in the Austin Independent School District	David A. Doss and Freda M. Holly	1985	Austin, Texas	5,039	24% (4 years)	6.00%	24%	Large school district. Format of study and findings very similar to San Juan High study.
Study of Student Dropouts in the Los Angeles Unified School District	LAUSD Dropout Prevention/ Recovery Committee	1985	Los Angeles, CA	100,000+	6.41% (1 year)	6.41%	25.64%	Largest school district in California attempts to define a dropout and explains how data were collected.
How Many Graduate: A Study of the Freshman Class of 1979 at San Juan High School	San Juan Unified School Dist. Research & Evaluation Department	1985	Citrus Heights, CA	386	22.6% (4 years)	5.65%	22.6%	Students were given almost six years to graduate. However, after August, 1983, only six more graduated, and only one graduated after June, 1984.

*Reported rates were divided or multiplied by appropriate factor to give "one year" and "four year" rates.